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ABSTRACT

This paper provides some activities that can be used to acquaint business students with the cultural differences that might be encountered in international business situations. Activities described involve: (1) exposing students to cultural differences through the use of foreign art and literature; (2) requiring students to prepare a cultural orientation report on the U.S. through the use of the "Culturgram for the '90s" series from David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies; (3) creating a memorandum on the customs of a potential foreign supplier; (4) planning a dinner party for foreign business visitors to implement what was learned, such as understanding general courtesies and etiquette, diet, and considerations in designing the meal plan; and (5) having students create a training session about inter-cultural communication for business executives who are considering transacting business with people of selected foreign countries. Ideas are also given on ways in which the training sessions can be conducted. (GLR)

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Running Head: USING CULTURAL RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS

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Using Cultural Research Assignments to Help Business Students Become More Culturally Aware

Competition in the global marketplace demands that American business people understand the culture and customs of those with whom they transact business (Adler, 1991; Glover, 1990). The importance of intercultural communication in the workplace is evident in the increase in the number of intercultural-management consultants. Berger (1987) in an article for International Management relates success stories for companies who have applied intercultural-management concepts, realizing increases in profits as well as expansion of markets.

While America's young people are being described as globally handicapped, Federal agencies announce that cultural communication competencies will be in greater demand than ever in foreign trade relations and diplomacy (Lurie, 1982). American students have severe deficiencies in foreign languages and an inadequate understanding of world affairs, have a diminished opportunity for exchange experiences because of the reduction in government support for such programs, and are constrained by restrictive provincialism. Report

after report emphasizes the need to understand not only the language, but also the culture of business associates.

If American businesses are to succeed in the international arena, American students must learn to understand and communicate with their foreign counterparts on all levels. Preparing American students for the realities of business in the international marketplace can take many forms. The following are some of the activities that can be used to acquaint students with the cultural differences that might be encountered in international business situations.

Exposure to Culture through Foreign Art and Literature

For students from the rural Midwest, fostering an appreciation and respect for other cultures may involve first of all introducing them to the concept that they themselves practice and are products of a distinct culture. Sensitizing them to their own culture and variations that exist within American culture opens them up to the idea that there may be any number of ways of operating, and all have validity.

A good initial activity might be to view a foreign film. For an American class, even a movie made in Australia, in spite of the common language and remarkably similar early histories, will reveal culture differences that are neither threatening nor incomprehensible, but are significant enough to spark comment. As the students view the action, have them note everything that seems to them unusual. Subsequent discussion might focus on these questions:

1. Which of the occurrences that seemed strange to you were accepted as quite normal by the characters?
2. Into what kinds of groups do people seem to fall?
3. What relationships exist between these groups and how do they interact with each other? Who initiates contact?
4. Who is respected and how is this respect shown?
5. What virtues, qualities, or objects seem to be valued?
6. What kind of authority seems to be operating?
7. What things cause joy or consternation?
8. How do people celebrate successes?

9. What kinds of communication situations constitute problems?

10. How do people go about solving problems?

As these questions are considered, the students should be encouraged to make comparisons with what they have observed in their own communities, and differences within the communities to which they belong (gender, age, profession, religion, race, national background, geography) can be brought out. From the beginning, the intent should be to observe and understand the differences in culture--never to rate and judge. If the research into other cultures does not turn up anything too different, the student will not be tempted to make a judgement on a particular cultural practice. For this reason, countries with cultures similar to the American culture could actually be very useful for the first exercises.

Short stories also work very well to accomplish this initial sensitizing. A piece like "Patriotism" by Japan's Yukio Mishima (available in many collections of international short stories) provides quite an eye-opener for American students. This story's main character, a

lieutenant in the imperial forces, chooses to commit seppuku (ritual suicide) rather than become the agent used to punish his friends for an act of rebellion with which he was in complete agreement. For American students, suicide is a shameful, cowardly solution; for the author, it is the most glorious act of loyalty to the emperor and is highly admirable. After the initial shock at the events of the story, students can be led to investigate why their attitude to the death is so different from the author's (largely the Judao-Christian influence on laws that made attempted suicide a crime), and how this influence can be seen in other aspects of American culture.

Of course documentaries, culture texts, and even travelogues allow the student to see the culture at work and to observe the relationships and mores that operate, but imaginative texts encourage an immersion in the other culture that factual descriptions do not. It is almost as if students have firsthand exposure to the culture. When working with students and attempting to sensitize students, this is a useful technique.

Prepare a Cultural Orientation Report on the U.S.

For another activity, students use the "Culturgram for the '90s" series from the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies and select a country to research. The Culturgram for the country chosen covers a variety of topics, including the following:

- Customs and Courtesies--greetings, visiting, eating, gestures
- The People--general attitudes, personal appearance, population, language, religion, education, health,
- Life-Style--the family, dating and marriage, diet, business, recreation, holidays
- The Nation--land and climate, history, government, economy, transportation and communication, and travel information.

Students study the Culturgram and select at least one area to use as a model in preparing a similar piece on the United States. In relating their own cultural information to that of another country, students become familiar with differences and similarities and see the foreign country as an extension of their world, rather than as a kind of fairy land to be read about in grade

school. Documentaries, culture texts, and even fiction can also provide insight about cultural aspects of interaction in the business setting.

Memorandum on Customs of Potential Foreign Supplier

An assignment that is more representative of the business world could involve the student in learning about and then writing about the customs of another country. Students are asked to research a particular country and set up a report as a memorandum to several middle managers who are going overseas as a liaison team to discuss possible trade options with a foreign supplier. Suggesting that one or more of the executives may need to stay for as long as six months would expand the dimensions of the assignment.

The following topics could be used as a basis for the report information:

- Climate--give climatic information and recommend the type of clothing to be taken.
- Transportation and Geography--describe the local and international transportation systems in relation to the type of travel and conditions the executives can expect.

- Trade--describe the types of commercial activities, including information about the local markets and whether the society is largely agricultural, industrial, or service-oriented.
- Standard of Living--give information that will allow the executive to prepare for the living conditions, health services available, and economic health of the country.
- Culture--provide information about local customs, national holidays, ceremonies, appropriate jokes, suitable topics of conversation, and events about which the traveler should know in order to be appropriately prepared for happenings and conversation with the residents.
- Food--describe the types of food that the executive can expect, including information about local delicacies, restaurants, and health information.
- Religion--provide details about the types of religious institutions that will be available to the traveling executive and outline the degree of freedom of worship tolerated by the government.

- Government--detail the government and political system prevailing, especially as it affects business travel and foreign relations.
- Background--include any information about history, and so forth, that will better prepare the reader for the conditions of the country.

Plans for a Dinner Party for Foreign Business Visitors

Another assignment concentrates on one aspect of cultural differences. The students are asked to prepare a plan for a dinner party given in the United States for executives from two or three other countries. The plan should include hints on whether to be prepared for gifts (flowers, food, wine), whether to have any special decorating done, the variety of food that will appeal to all cultural palates, the degree of formality, any requirements for advance notice, serving suggestions (e.g., customs regarding second helpings, pre-served plates, kinds of desserts, special "signals" such as serving fruit ten minutes before the guests are to depart).

For example, the following plan is for entertaining executives from Germany. The information was taken from a Culturgram.

General Courtesies

Handshakes are the most common form of greeting and should be extended to women before men. In a group, one should not attempt to shake hands with more than one person at a time since crossing someone else's handshake is rude according to German custom. A sincere smile is always appreciated; however, only family members and close friends address each other by first names. An exception is the German youth, who are beginning to use more informal methods of greeting. The most common form of greetings are Guten Tag (Good Day) or Hallo (Hello).

Guests are expected to arrive on time, and dinner guests will often bring flowers to the hostess. The flowers must be unwrapped before the hostess sees them. In addition, roses are never brought because they are symbols of love, and carnations are never used because they symbolize mourning. German guests will usually stand when their host enters the room and will remain standing until offered a seat again. They will also

stand when a woman enters the room. Refreshments are always served to guests even during short visits, but all visits are usually arranged in advance.

Etiquette

Germans eat with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Hands are kept above the table with wrists resting on the table edge. One does not cut potatoes and fish with a knife because this will imply that the food is not fully cooked. Most Germans prefer beer, wine, or mineral water with meals; they rarely drink tap water. Cold drinks are not considered healthy; so ice should not be served with drinks. Soft drinks and fruit juices are also popular beverages in Germany.

Diet

Potatoes, noodles, dumplings, sauces, vegetables, cakes, and pastries are common foods. Breakfast usually consists of rolls, marmalade, and coffee. The main meal is traditionally served at noon and includes soup, a main dish, and dessert. The evening meal usually includes open-faced sandwiches. Germans enjoy sausages, pork, chicken, and other meats preferring fresh foods for cooking.

Meal Plan

After gathering the facts about a country's diet and customs, students then prepare a meal plan. For example, the host and hostess will know that they should have a vase ready for the fresh flowers that will probably be brought by their German guests. Also, students will know not to use carnations or roses as table decorations. From the facts presented, students can decide on the menu and also what to offer as beverages. This assignment requires not only gathering cultural data from many sources, but also applying this information and developing a specific meal plan.

Training Session about Inter-Cultural Communication

In a more comprehensive study of intercultural differences, students are assigned to devise a training session to familiarize employees with the culture of another country. As a first step, the students write an informational memo comparing and contrasting a low-context culture with a high-context culture. When the differences in cultural backgrounds are wide, as they are in low-context and high-context cultures, such a study

can help the student understand where cultural barriers to communication could exist.

The students are asked to prepare reports to be used in training sessions for business executives who are considering transacting business with people of selected foreign countries. Students then use this research information to prepare an oral presentation which would simulate a training session in a corporation. The teacher would begin the assignment by giving the students a definition of a low-context culture and a high-context culture.

Definition of Low-Context and High-Context Culture

Hall (1976) defined culture by the degree and kind of social context that surrounds the message. In **low-context** cultures, the condition that surround the business negotiation are not important. The English, North Americans, Scandinavians, Swiss, and Germans have low-context cultures. What is important is put into written, contractual form, while the social context is not considered.

In **high-context** cultures, the social setting or the atmosphere is extremely important in business

negotiations. Status and reputation are more important than what is in writing. Positive social interaction must take place and a trust relationship must be developed before a business transaction can be completed. Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese and, Arabic nations have high-context cultures. The written contract is not as important as the social setting or the process that leads to the written contract.

Assignment for Student

The student is directed to choose a country which has a low-context culture and a country which has a high-context culture. After studying the countries, the student writes an informational memo describing the similarities and differences of the cultures. He or she is asked to present the information in a training session to executives who are involved in business transactions with the two selected countries. As pupils learn about the two cultures, they are directed to compare and contrast answers to ten of the following questions.

1. What is the history of the relationship of the two countries? their relationship to the U.S.?
2. What is the normal work schedule in each country?

3. Do they have different perceptions regarding time? Is it important to be on time for meetings?
4. How do they use physical space to communicate? office space?
5. What are their important holidays? How are they observed?
6. What do they do for leisure and recreational activities?
7. Are customers expected to bargain for merchandise, or is the price fixed?
8. What emphasis is placed on the family unit?
9. May customers touch and handle merchandise?
10. What are the commonly used greetings and phrases?
11. What is the proper protocol for greeting an individual?
12. When a person says "yes," does it really mean "yes," or does "yes" have several other meanings?
13. What are some acceptable and unacceptable gestures?
14. In their business writing, are they formal or informal, direct or indirect?
15. How do interpersonal skills differ among the various countries?

In presenting the training session, students may use a variety of formats such as lecture, knowledge quiz, discussion, or even role playing.

Summary

A variety of inter-cultural assignments can be integrated into the business communication course to expose American college students to the world beyond the country's borders. Assignments can include descriptions of various cultural facets of one nation, comparisons of a specific aspect within several cultures, or comparisons of U.S. customs with those of other countries. As the global village becomes a reality, the importance of intercultural communication skills increases.

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